

**In Defence of Lepers and *Leprosaria*:
Leprosy as the "Holy Disease"**

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HIST 228

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December 22nd, 2022

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"Holy Disease"**



Jesus cleansing a leper



It is a known fact that we live among lepers, yet we rarely see them living alongside us. This is as leprosy condemns its poor victims to a fate perhaps worse than the grave:

complete ostracization from society. It is, then, no wonder why we have long called the disease "the death before death." But where is the leper to go when society has turned its back to them? Their only salvation is the *leprosaria*, the hospitals that shelter and isolate leprosy patients, run by us good-willed Christians. We believe that lepers are not unclean, corrupt sinners, but rather those chosen by God to be redeemed. We therefore urge you to be sympathetic to the leper's suffering, for it mirrors that of Christ, and see leprosy instead as a "holy disease." We pray that the following examination of the leper's grueling symptoms, cruel exclusion from society, and Jesus' parable of Lazarus inspires you to take pity upon lepers. In the process, we hope you come to understand how the *leprosarium* protects public health, shows the sick compassion as Jesus preached, and condemns the prejudice that poisons society. Most of all, we hope you consider donating to us so that we may continue our important and life-changing work.



A leper and his bell

Once their symptoms manifest, the leper's life is over – not because leprosy is particularly fatal, but because of our society's pervasive fear of contracting the disease. Drastic steps are taken to ostracize them from normal society: their civil rights are stripped, their marriages are annulled, and their inheritances are claimed. They are forced to don distinctive clothing and wear bells around their necks to warn us of their presence. They are banned from entering churches, markets, taverns, mills, and bakehouses, and forbidden from touching anything with their bare hands in public. Furthermore, leper masses are held to declare the sick officially dead to society, in which the leper is covered in a black shroud and led from the church to his house as a dead man. Is it not enough for the leper to suffer physically? Why must we turn our cheek to the leper's plight? We Christians who run these *leprosaria* implore you to remember Jesus' parable in Luke 16:19–31, in which the rich man who did not help the sick Lazarus was sent to Hell.

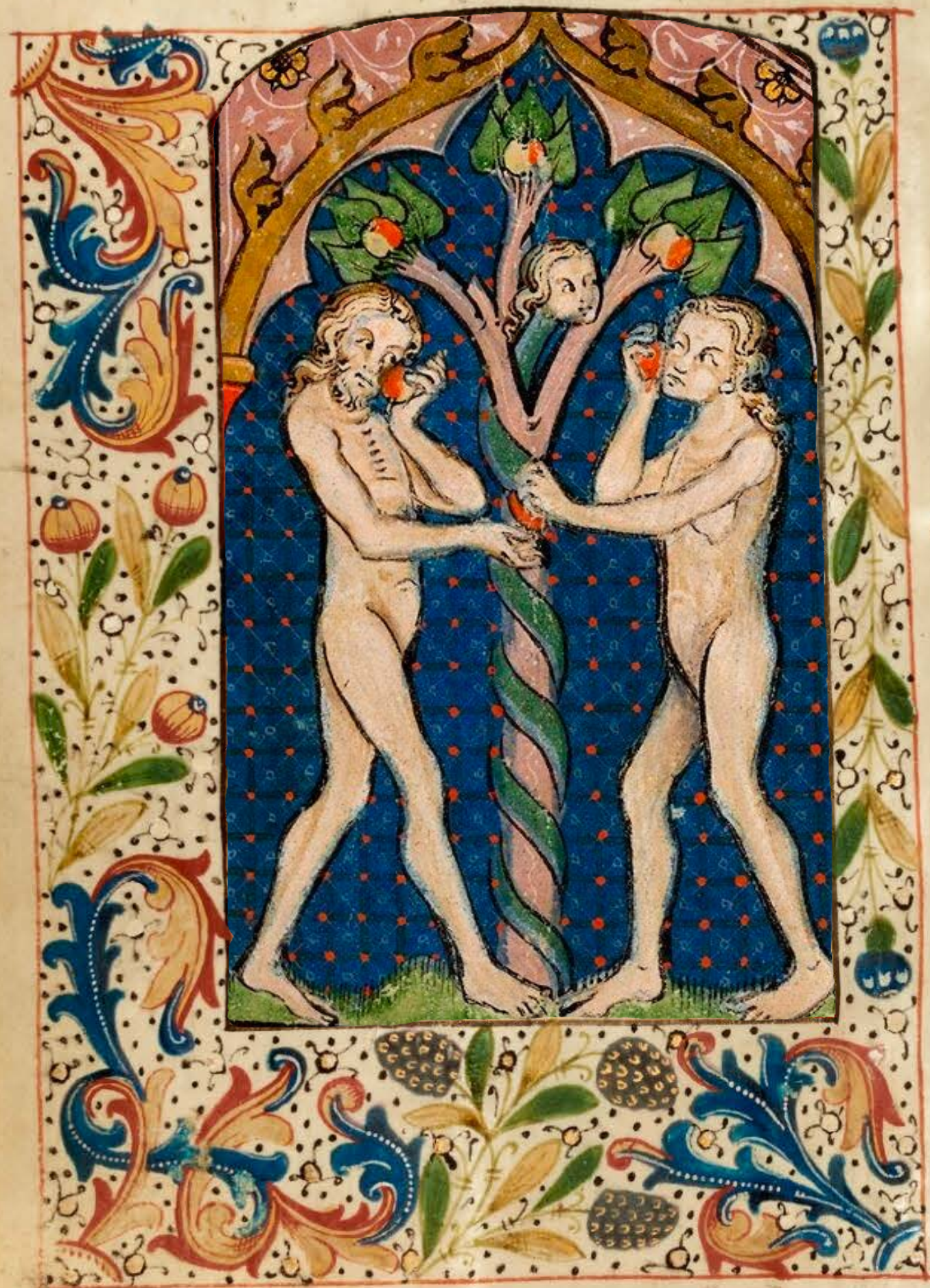


Leprosy victims, covered in sores

We know this wicked disease has plagued us since ancient times - the term "leprosy" comes from the Ancient Greek for 'scale', referencing how the disease causes the skin to peel and scale off.

Indeed, leprosy causes a grotesque disfigurement of the skin. The skin of lepers is covered with nodules and lesions, so visible that lepers are instantly discernible from the rest of society.

Another common symptom is a permanent loss of sensation, both of the digits and of the muscles in the arms and legs. Conversely, patients may experience a permanent sensitivity of the skin, enduring a constant sensation of prickling across the entire face. This is at first light, as if from needles, and then painful, as if being poked with large spines. Their discoloured skin, covered in hardened tumours and sores, constantly itches. Their hands and feet frequently grow into deformed claws. Their eyes are tinged with red. Their facial features slowly degenerate, most evidently in the nose. And on top of their striking appearance, there is the fetid odor of a leper's breath, sweat, blood, and skin. It is a tormented existence. Is it not our duty, as good Christians, to be charitable to those who suffer from such an affliction?



The Biblical serpent

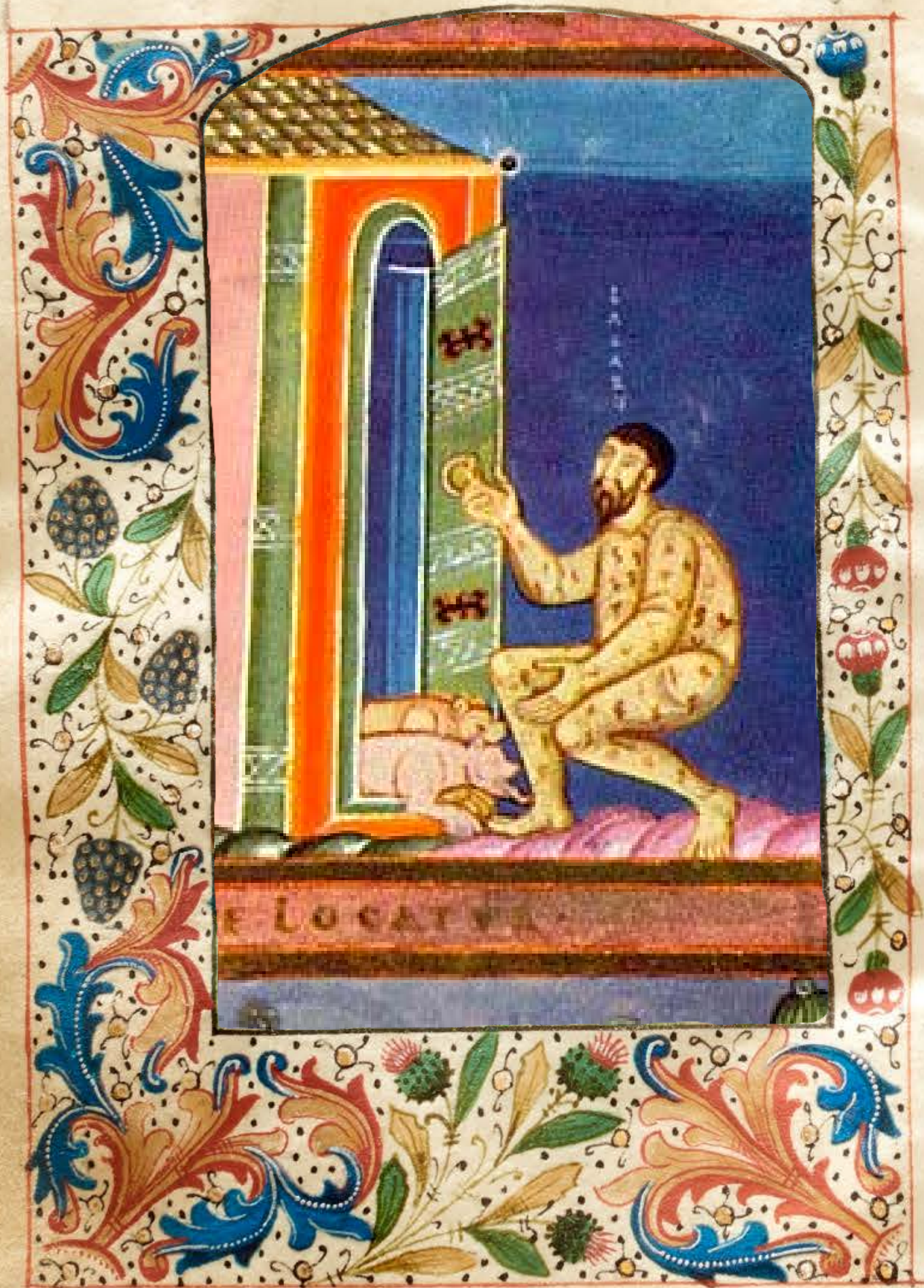
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The work of surgeon Guy de Chauliac in 1363 taught us that leprosy is both “contagious and infectious” and can therefore spread through both miasmatic air and physical contact. We also know that diseases are caused by the imbalance of the four humours – black and yellow bile, blood, and phlegm – in the body. According to the physician Gilbert the Englishman’s diagnostic guide for leprosy, there are four kinds of the disease, each corresponding to a specific humour within the blood being overheated. Leprosy caused by adust melancholic blood is *elephantia*, adust choleric blood *leonina*, adust phlegmatic blood *tyria*, and adust blood corrupted in its own right is *allopicia*. The names of each of these types liken the leper to an animal: elephants, lions, serpents, and foxes, respectively. It is no coincidence that lepers, with their swollen appearance, are compared to elephants. Nor is it a coincidence to be compared to serpents, recalling the Biblical serpent in the Garden of Eden that tempted Eve and brought sin upon all man. These names only further the notion that lepers are less than human and that leprosy is caused by sin.



*Lazarus, a leprous beggar,
ascends to heaven*

Many believe lepers' outward disfigurement to be proof of their internal worldly sins and wickedness. In particular, because leprosy is a disease of the flesh, it has been primarily associated with lustful behaviour. Even Gilbert the Englishman's diagnostic guide asserts that leprosy victims "search for sexual pleasure more than usual and more than they should." Yet during a leprosy victim's official ritual of exclusion, the priest will proclaim, "if in weakness of body by means of suffering you are made like unto Christ, you may surely hope that you will rejoice in spirit with God." Such a statement is an admission that the suffering of lepers is akin to the suffering of Christ. Therefore, we argue that lepers are not suffering because they are sinners – they are suffering because they have been chosen by God to be redeemed. Through their suffering, they are spiritually purified and may ascend directly to heaven upon death.



The beggar Lazarus

We see the leprous beggar Lazarus ascending to heaven in Jesus' parable of Lazarus and Dives in Luke 16:19–31. When Lazarus dies, he meets Abraham; in contrast, the rich man who refused to help him is condemned to Hell. Our work in the *leprosaria* thus honours Jesus' call to treat the sick with kindness and compassion, lest we, too, are condemned.



Lepers being burned alive

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Showing the sick compassion is simply our duty as good Christians. There are great consequences otherwise, when we allow ourselves to be ruled by prejudice. In the past few decades, there have been many rumours of lepers plotting to destroy western Christendom. One such rumour from our neighbouring kingdom of France was the Leper Plot of 1321. One account from a Frenchman claims that lepers planned to "spread disease everywhere [and] kill all Christians" by poisoning the wells, despite no real evidence of the sort. This great distrust of leprosy victims, particularly due to the stigma of them as morally corrupt, led to large-scale attacks on our leprosaria, and many lepers were captured and burned alive. This witch hunt is no way to treat God's chosen – the real poison here is prejudice.



A leprosy woman prays at the shrine of St. William.

Lastly, a donation to us goes directly towards supporting leprosy victims in pursuing a religious vocation, as our *leprosaria* are also sites of religious conversion. As lepers are among the elect of God who are predestined to salvation, their prayers are particularly successful. If you make a charitable donation to our *leprosaria*, you may reduce your own time in purgatory and ensure your ascension to heaven, a salvation guaranteed by the leper's prayer.



We hope you can see now why the *leprosaria* deserve your charity. Firstly, we provide a public health service, in that we provide a safe shelter for lepers to isolate. This contains the miasma into one area and prevents physical contact with lepers, protecting the healthy citizen. Furthermore, we help convert lepers into a pious life. When you donate, you not only honour Jesus' teachings as in the parable of Lazarus, but through the leper's prayers in thanks to you, your salvation is promised. It is our true belief that leprosy is a holy disease, not a divine punishment, and that lepers are God's chosen. We therefore urge you all reading this to consider donating to us so we may continue our work sheltering those sick with leprosy, as the maintenance and construction of our institutions depend upon your public charity.

A patient is cared for at a leprosarium